

As I Remember Them—James G. Fair

By C. C. Goodwin

ABOUT five feet eight inches in height, weighing, say 210 pounds, massive every way; a sovereign head; a splendid face; a soft voice; a winsome personality—a tiger satisfied in captivity and inclined to purr, and seldom "to unsheath from his cushioned feet his curving claws." A master mechanic who could do anything in iron and steel, a perfect judge of any kind of machinery; a brain in which everything was reduced to perfect order; one of the very shrewdest of financiers; a mind that could reason from cause to effect with lightning-like rapidity and perfect certainty, and from early childhood more interested in the affairs of James G. Fair than of any other soul on earth. From childhood he knew, what so few men ever learn, the exact value of a dollar, and was strong enough when his fortune climbed into the millions, never to forget the unit and what it was worth.

Early in California quartz veins had the greatest attraction for him. If a vein assayed \$7 per ton, and if 80 per cent of the value could be saved, that meant \$5.60. If that could be mined and reduced for \$2 per ton there would be \$3.60 saved and one hundred tons per day would mean a saving of \$360, and that would be newly-created wealth. If 85 per cent could be extracted and the cost reduced 50 cents per ton, then the profit could be \$4.45 per ton or \$450 per day. How to perfect machinery to save a higher percentage from the assay value, and how to adjust machinery and labor to reduce the cost of working, were his study for years in the Golden State. From it one can readily see how well prepared he was to wrestle with the problems that the Comstock presented. I believe it is fair to say that the Wheeler grinding and amalgamating pan was the most important adjunct in the working of Comstock ores in the first twenty years in which those ores were worked. Mr. Fair always claimed that every feature of the pan was his original idea.

He went to the Comstock as a machinist, but in California he had given much study to ore presentations and in a brief time he understood perfectly, both the formation of the great lode and its peculiarities, for all great mines have habits of their own.

When the mining stock board was established in San Francisco, and the dealing in stocks became the great feature of that city, no one understood better than Mr. Fair its possibilities. In the meantime he had learned to know John W. Mackay well and both knew Flood and O'Brien in San Francisco, and a combine was made. The San Francisco firm had some means and when from the Comstock word was sent to buy or sell stocks, or to buy on a margin or to sell short, Flood responded, and a good deal of money was made. They soon became a factor; then they began to get control of certain of the mines; they made one diversion and lost \$300,000 in a Silver City, Idaho, mine, and thereafter clung with more tenacity to the great vein under Mount Davidson. By 1870 they had obtained control of the California Consolidated Virginia, Best and Belcher and Gould and Curry all adjoining. Their hope was to explore the old workings of the California and Con-Virginia, believing that a good deal of money could be made from low-grade ores that had been left in the stopes, as the cost of reduction and transportation had been much reduced. They worked with but indifferent success for six months, when one evening, Mr. Fair met Captain McKay, who long had been in charge of the Gould and Curry, before the Bonanza firm obtained possession. Captain McKay was a fine geologist and scholar generally, besides being a perfect miner.

McKay said to Fair, "Why do you not go to the bottom of the Gould and Curry shaft and drift north? The shaft is 1,200 feet deep; a tunnel north from it would be below all the workings of the Best and Belcher, the Con. Virginia and California; it would be in virgin ground, and if there are any deep ore bodies on the fissure, the outcrop of which was the surface ore body of the Mexican and Ophir, by the trend of the vein you ought to strike them."

"I don't think there is anything in it," was Uncle Jimmie's reply, but that night three shifts of men were set to work at the bottom of the Curry shaft. It was all blasting rock; it had to be run back to the Curry shaft, hoisted 1,200 feet and run out on the dump. It required a good deal of nerve and a great deal of money, but it was pushed out through the north end of the Curry, 150 feet, through the Best and Belcher 750 feet and 150 feet into the south end of the Con. Virginia, when the great bonanza was struck about 30 feet below its apex. Had the shaft been only 1,100 instead of 1,200 feet deep, the drift would have passed over it and it might have remained undiscovered still.

When I left Virginia City it had yielded \$119,000,000 and had paid in dividends \$67,000,000. Of course Uncle Jimmie made some millions from it, but it did not change him, rather it made him as the boys on the Comstock said, more so. The anecdotes of him were numberless. When the big bonanza was fully opened it was 400 feet wide in places and was laid off in great galleries by wide drifts like the streets of a city.

It was intensely hot, and so the timbers—it required 3,000,000 feet per month for several years—became as dry as tinder. A fire started in those depths would have made a volcano in an hour.

Hence the strictest rules were enforced against everything that might start a fire. One rule forbade smoking. Uncle Jimmie went down in the mine one day and going to one of the stopes thought he detected the odor of tobacco smoke. He said nothing but went to other portions of the mine and in half an hour returned, sinking down on the floor of the drift with a deep sigh he said, "I am surely growing old, a little run through the mine tires me more than a day's work used to. I think if I had a few puffs of a pipe it would refresh me greatly." A dozen pipes were presented in a moment. Uncle Jimmie took one, puffed away for a moment, then with many thanks handed it back, saying that it had greatly revived him and went to the surface.

The next day going down Taylor street toward the mine, he met that whole shift of men going up the hill, "Why, how is this?" said he; "I thought this was your shift."

One of them replied, "We have been laid off." "Laid off?" said Fair. "That is John (Mackay). I never get a crew of men that just suit me, that John doesn't discharge them." And with a sigh he passed on. But the miners knew better and called him names as they climbed the hill.

One day a gentleman with his wife and grown lady daughter called at the Con-Virginia office and the man asked if it was possible to visit the lower levels of the mine. The clerk called down to the lower shaft house, telling what was wanted. The reply came back to send the strangers down there at once. They put on the needed clothes and were shown to the cage. The man at the engine was told to stop at 16. When the party left the cage a miner received them and for an hour or more showed them 'round, explaining what was ore, what country rock, how ore was mined; how

big mines were timbered, all the time talking wisely of ore formations, the working and ventilation and drainage of mines; the provisions made for escape in case of a cave or a fire or other accident.

The party was charmed with the sturdy miner who seemed so well informed and so affable. When they reached the cage and were about to be hoisted from the depth, the Boston man tendered the miner a bright new silver dollar. The miner thanked him but declined the gift, remarking that the company paid him for his time and it was easier to show strangers around than to swing a pick.

"But," said the man, "this is for you personally." But still the miner declined, saying that what he had done was no trouble, but rather a pleasure.

But the Boston man persisted and said: "Now, tell me honestly, my man, why you do not wish to take this dollar."

The miner sighed and said: "Well, one reason is that I have \$600,000 up in the bank and it has been bothering me all the morning to decide how I had better invest it."

It was Uncle Jimmie and he smiled softly as the cage shot up the shaft.

A man and his wife in San Francisco filed the papers in a suit against Mr. Mackay, claiming heavy damage for seeking to alienate the affections of the wife from her husband. It was a direct attempt at blackmail and Mackay never rested until he landed both the man and his wife in the penitentiary. But when the news of the filing of the suit reached Mackay in Virginia, he was furious. No one had ever seen him so angry before. He paced up and down the Con-Virginia office like a tiger and the old lines would have fitted him:

We tore them limb from limb;
And the hungriest lion doubted
'Ere he disputed with him.

The woman's given name was Amelia, Uncle Jimmie went down to the office that morning, but seeing how the atmosphere was he softly went out and started across the foot-bridge for the Ophir works. On the bridge he met a young man and woman. The young woman stopped him and explained that the young man was her brother; that he was a splendid worker, and that they both needed what he could earn and besought a place for him. Uncle Jimmie smiled down at her and said, "My dear! John tends to all that, go to the office, I just left him. Go and tell him what you have told me, and tell him your name is Amelia and I am sure he will give your brother a place!"

Fortunately they did not get to see Mr. Mackay that morning.

On one occasion Mr. Fair returned to Virginia after an absence of a couple of months, when a blacksmith presented a bill for \$80. Uncle Jimmie looked at it and said: "Eighty dollars. What might this be for?"

The smith explained that it was for shoeing Mrs. Fair's carriage horses, setting the tires on the carriage and—but Uncle Jimmie interrupted him with: "That is all right, I was not disputing your bill, but I am superintendent of four mines, and the companies pay for all necessary work. Take the bill home and bring me back four bills, against the four companies, but not all quite alike. Make one for \$22 to sundries against the Con-Virginia; once for say \$18 against the California; one for \$24 against the Curry and one for \$16 against the Best and Belcher, and I will try to get them allowed, though times are hard."

He went to San Francisco in 1877, called at some offices on Montgomery street on business, and glancing around the offices, thought he would like them. He knew who owned the block and the